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THE SOCIETY OF RETREAT CONDUCTORS
A HISTORY

The Reverend Dr John Tyers

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About the author.

The Reverend Dr John Tyers is a retired Anglican priest. He was born in 1931, trained for the priesthood at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, was made a deacon in 1955 and priested in 1956, both in the Diocese of Coventry, where he was to spent thirty years serving in various parishes. He became a member of the Society of Retreat Conductors in 1984, later becoming Warden of the Chelmsford Diocesan Retreat House. In 1991 he returned to parochial work before retiring in 1996.

A History of the Society of Retreat Conductors.

The Society of Retreat Conductors (SRC) was formed in 1924 by a small group of Anglo-Catholic clergy, with the help of some spinster ladies and the key financial help and drive of one layman who would later be a Guardian of the Shrine at Walsingham. This is an account of its history of nearly 90 years.

The account of how retreats began in the Church of England has been told a number of times.[1] By the beginning of the 20th century the practice, although confined largely to the Anglo-Catholic part of the church, was growing and at the first Anglo-Catholic Congress in 1920 Father J F Brisco gave a talk in which he stressed their importance in the individual's life. Also a book was published by a Jesuit priest in 1912, Charles Plater's *Retreats for the People,* written in the light of Continental of the experience of retreat houses in Belgium and France, which advocated the value of retreats in evangelising working men.[2] This idea was greeted with enthusiasm by amongst others the Archbishop of York, Cosmo Lang, president of the Church of England Men's Society, who addressed 1,000 men on the subject in 1913. The same year, the layman Major Arthur Bowker, a survivor of the Klondike good rush, a water engineer in Kent and an enthusiastic member of the Territorial Army, took his local curate Fr Philip Bacon to Belgium to see these Continental houses. On his return he and other laymen issued a report to the Bishop of Rochester recommending that a house be set up in that Diocese.[3] However the war intervened.

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[1] E.g. Tyers, J, *Borrowed Silence; A History of the Practice of Retreat in the Church of England.* Degree Thesis, University of Chester, 2012. pp 31,32.
[2] Plater, C, D. (1912). *Retreats for the People.* London, B. Herder.
[3] The archives of the Society of Retreat Conductors are kept at the Company Offices, St Mary Woolnoth Vestry, Lombard St, London, EC3V 9AN. They are stored in a number of boxes, of which

Just as war ended, semi- official encouragement was given to the idea by the Committee on Evangelism, set up after the failure of the Nation Mission, for a place that people could come to a living experience of God. A few houses already existed privately owned, but the first diocesan house was at Pleshey, Chelmsford, in 1919, which is still operating today, followed by Birmingham and Lichfield and in the following years others followed.

This early success brought a number of problems. First, there was no pool of experienced retreat conductors and so no guarantee could be given how a retreat would be taken, it being left to the whim of the retreat leader how it was led. There was a need, some people felt, for the standardisation of retreats so that men who attended knew what to expect, and this in turn meant that there was a need for adequately trained and specialist conductors.[4]

Secondly, the retreats on offer were too short. In his tract on retreats published some sixty years before, Fr Richard Benson, who led the first retreat ever held in the Church of England, had said that retreats needed to be at least three days long; the first day was spent getting away from everyday concerns, and it was not until the third day that the exercise began to tell. Indeed, retreats on the Continent lasted for this full three full days. Although Anglican retreats for clergy were usually for five days, laymen's retreats were often shorter, typically beginning at Saturday tea time after the men had finished the week's work, and ending with a very early Monday breakfast before beginning the next week's employment, leaving just one full day of silence.

Thirdly, the pioneers of the retreat method in the Church of England, including Benson and Canon T. T. Carter, had recognised the importance of using the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius as the basis for this form of devotion. Although conductors stuck fairly rigidly to the outward form of a preached retreat, individual addresses had often strayed from what was assumed to be the Ignatian ideal. Fourthly, the retreat houses which opened in the early 1920's were often cheap and inadequate adaptations of redundant large houses. For example, in the Lichfield diocese, the Diocesan Missioner, the Revd T. L. Murray, had in 1920 taken a fifteen year lease on a property set in some 25-30 acres of land, and had converted several large rooms into 25 cubicles by using curtaining before equipping other rooms as chapel, dining room and lounge.[5] Such conversions tended to be makeshift and Spartan, making real solitude, silence and a welcoming atmosphere difficult to achieve. Further, they proved to be expensive to run, and some only survived for a few years.

In 1923, Bowker and Bacon returned to the Continent, taking with them Fr Herbert Mather, who had served in the French Red Cross from 1915-1919 and was now Chaplain to the nuns at St Saviour's Priory, Haggerston, accompanied by Fr Edwin Power and Fr Frank Wyatt. They visited houses in Belgium and Northern France meeting Père Watrigant, 'the greatest living student of the Spiritual Exercises,' as well as the great ecumenicist Cardinal Mercier and the Abbot of Maritzon.[6] During their tour they saw specialist teams of fully trained priests who used Ignatian methods, who were leading retreats for working men which lasted for at least three full days duration, taken in houses which were designed and built especially for the purpose.

Immediately on their return, the four priests began to meet regularly to study the Ignatian method, and they resolved to form the Society of Retreat Conductors, 'for the purpose of conducting Retreats according to

Box 3, Box 5 and cardboard box (CB) are relevant. Major Bowker's report is kept in CB in the Press cutting (PC). Also there are a number of Scrap Books, SB1, SB2, SB3, and SB4.

[4] *Vision,* a Magazine published by the Association of the Promotion of Retreats, Aug. 1922, pp. 5, 6.

[5] *Vision,* 1921, p.2.

[6] CB, L1, p. 2

the method of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, and for the furthering of the Retreat Movement in such manner as shall from time to time be decided'.[7] It would incidentally produce more Anglo-Catholic Christians, which was an unspoken aim of the Society.

By October 1924, Frs Wyatt and Bacon had joined Fr Mather in his home at 161 Tufnell Park Road to live together as a kind of Oratorian community, sharing their income and a following a common rule of prayer. Their intention was to devote themselves completely to the study and practice of the Ignatian method of conducting retreats. To this end, they received an annual grant of £250 from the Anglo-Catholic Congress Committee for five years, as well as accepting fees for service given in local parishes. Through the generosity of Mather, they had bought a lease on the adjacent property so that they could welcome other priests to join them, and also offer hospitality to a limited number of retreatants.[8] On Tuesday October 21st, the Bishop of Stepney 'dressed in cope and mitre,' with Bowker acting as thurifer, blessed the house and admitted Mather, Wyatt and Bacon as members of the Society, further admitting Mather as their Superior. Amongst those present were Fr Bull SSJE and Canon Alan Simpson, the latter being at that time acting secretary of the Association for Promoting Retreats (APR). Also in attendance were Miss Lorna Dalziel and Miss Winifrede Bliss, who we will hear about later.[9]

The Society had five stated objects; to train priests to conduct of retreats; to lead retreats, in particular retreats for men; to own and to manage retreat houses; to study the Ignatian method of retreats and all that relates to the Retreat Movement; and lastly to publish, or assist in publishing, literature about retreats.[10] There were three grades of membership. The first was full members, who formed the Chapter and took decisions. The second was Associate priests, who had one representative on the Chapter. These were clergy who has a special interest and training in retreats. Lastly there were lay people who took an interest in the work and provided financial support. In practice there was a fourth grade - Major Bowker, himself who was regarded as Founder and who provided much of the money for the project.

The limited accommodation in the Society's first home in Tufnell Park Road gave little scope to welcome retreatants, but during 1925 and 1926 members were kept busy responding to invitations from all over the county to lead retreats, visiting some 32 different houses.[11] During 1925, Mather led 15 retreats, Frs Wyatt, Bacon and Simons each led eight, and Fr Hillier led two.[12] Of these, three were private retreats, presumably in the Society's own house, 20 were for women and four for men. By July 1926, members were beginning to realise that the number of invitations to lead retreats elsewhere would diminish, and therefore they began to arrange their own programme.[13]

The members had from the start very ambitious ideas for their own retreat house and in 1927, an estate near West Kingsdown, Kent, some 20 miles from London and close to Wrotham, was purchased by Bowker and presented by him to the Society. It consisted of some 100 acres, with woodland and two cottages, and was known as Stacklands. An architectural model was displayed at the Anglo-Catholic Congress meeting in 1930, attracting much interest. It consisted of a chapel, domestic block with accommodation for three members of the Society and

[7] Box 3, CM1, 09/12/23.
[8] *Vision,* Nov. 1929, p. 14
[9] Box 3, CM1, 21/10/24.
[10] CB, PC.

[11] Retreat Statistics have be gathered from the Retreat Register (RR).
[12] Simons and Hillier were Priest Associates from 1925-1927. Fr Simons seems to have come into residence, although by July 31st 1926, the Superior is regretting the fact that he has not appeared at the Chapter meeting. Fr Wyatt resigned in June 1926 to undertake work in the Caribbean.
[13] Box 3, CM1, 31/07/26.

house staff, and two wings which between them would take some thirty retreatants.

The laity were organised into a Fellowship by the Bliss sisters Winifrede and Muriel.[14] The need for the proposed house was confirmed by the demand for the retreat work of the Society, 47 retreats being conducted in 1931 attended by some 520 retreatants.[15] It seemed as if all was set for the Chapter to instruct the architect to go ahead with the project when an obstacle was placed in their path.

This was in the shape of the new evangelical Bishop of Rochester, the Right Revd Martin Smith, who seemed to resent the possibility of the society settling in his diocese. He was willing to grant permission for the administration of Communion in the chapel of the proposed house, but only on the condition that the Society give an honourable undertaking not to reserve the consecrated elements. In Chapter, the Father Superior expressed the view that reservation was very necessary in the particular work which the Society was out to do, and saw four possible courses of action. The first was to build without the Bishop's permission; the second to hold on to the estate and carry on their work from the limited facilities in Tufnell Park; the third to hold on to the estate and to find some temporary premises in which the Society could enlarge its work, or fourthly to sell Stacklands and move to a more favourable diocese. It was decided to follow the third alternative,[16] and so the search for suitable building was begun.

By early 1934, the Society had moved from Tufnell Park Road to 37 Queens Gate, with importantly permission from the Bishop of London to reserve the sacrament in their oratory. They could welcome up to eight male retreatants at a time, and also host one or two ladies in an annex who were able to make their private retreat in the chapel. It was not the best retreat house, although better than the one in which they had begun, but, because of mortgage payments, high running costs and the few guests who used it, it was in fact to prove a liability.

Between June 1934 and August 1935, an ambitious programme of forthcoming retreats to be led by members of the Society was announced in the *Church Times,* including 28 for men, four for priests and three for ordinands, all to be held at No 37. In addition, 17 retreats were arranged for women, many to be held at Oakhurst in Erith, a house which had come into being as a result of Major Bowker's report of 1914 and which the Society was using regularly for its own retreats. In practice, during the year 1935, 66 retreats were led by the Members of the Society, 28 of them by Fr Mather, 15 by Fr Bacon, 14 by Fr Panton, who had come into full membership in 1930, and nine by Fr Thompson. This sounds wonderful, but sadly of these some 37 were held in their own house with an average attendance of only two. A further seven were led by Mather at St Savour's Priory as part of his duties as Chaplain there, and eight at Oakhurst. This leaves 16 retreats taken by invitation – half of what it had been a decade before. Still few men were coming, the vast majority of retreatants being women.[17]

By 1938, the Lay Associates of the Society, all of whom had given substantial amounts towards the cost of a permanent house, were becoming restless about the lack of progress. At the AGM in the October of that year, they proposed a motion asking the chapter to reopen negotiations with the Bishop of Rochester and to proceed with arrangements for beginning the building work. It was reported to an Extraordinary General Meeting held the following February that Bishop

[14] Box 3, CM1, 07/31.
[15] Box3, CM1, 02/09/32.
[16] Box3, CM1, 15/12/31, 02/08/32, 21/10/32, 15/12/32.
[17] Box 3, CM1, 13/03/34; CB, Leaflet (L) 1, p.4, Box5, RR.

Smith had now agreed to the reservation of the sacrament, but under strict conditions and only when it was desired by retreatants.

The treasurer, Mr F J Seal, who been welcomed as a Lay Associate in 1934 to succeed Bowker in this post, reported that there were insufficient funds available to pay for the first phase of the project as originally proposed. However the Society's new architect, Mr Leslie Moore, presented plans for a domestic block, reduced in size, which would contain a Dining Room, Library, Chapel and office, with accommodation on three floors for three priests, two maids and a few male retreatants, the others being housed in Stacklands cottage. This could be erected within the available budget. Work began on June 16th 1939 with Major Bowker acting as Clerk of Works, and the foundation stones were laid in the name of the four members of the Society in July. Mather, Bacon and Thompson each laid their own, whilst in his absence Panton's was laid by the architect.[18]

In September, soon after the outbreak of war, 37 Queens Gate, which had been already placed on the market, was closed, and the staff and resident Society members dispersed. Fr Mather took up residence at St Saviour's Priory Haggerston, and some retreats for women were held there. Work on the domestic block suffered delays, but it was eventually ready for use in April 1940, and the Superior moved into residence on the 29th of that month, the first Mass being said the following morning. Bishop Chavasse, who had only recently taken over from Bishop Smith, came to bless the house on the Feast of St Ignatius. At about this time, Fr Bacon, for reasons unrecorded, resigned from the Society, as did Fr Panton, who had consistently opposed the building programme, and also Fr Vincent, a priest associate.[19]

[18] Box 5, Mass Register (MR), 1928-1945.
[19] Box 3, CM2, 29/07/40.

Any feeling of celebration must have been rather muted. What they had erected was far from the original vision of the best retreat house, but at least the Society had a permanent home in a peaceful and quiet place where retreatants could be welcomed, with the possibility of enlarging it at a later date. The move had precipitated the break up of the team who had been at the heart of SRC for some years, and there now only two Members, Mather and Thompson, in residence. Further, there was all the uncertainty of the war going on over the English Channel in the very countries which had provided the inspiration for their work.

During the war years, many of the chapter meetings were held at The Chaplain's House at Haggerston Priory, so it would appear that Fr Mather divided his time between Stacklands and St Saviours. Fr Wyatt returned from abroad, was once again elected a member, and joined Fr Thompson in residence in the new house. The lay associate Miss Clark, who had for some years done the Society's book keeping, became the tenant of Stacklands Cottage No 1, on condition that when necessary she could provide up to three rooms for retreatants. Miss Dalziel had brought a plot of land on the Stacklands estate from the Society and, despite war time restrictions, managed to get her house built, and so in effect a wider SRC community came into being. Thompson left in October 1942 on his appointment as a lecturer at Oxford, but was elected as a priest associate, as 'it was not considered that his forth coming marriage was an impediment to such election,' and continued to act as Chapter secretary. Unfortunately Muriel and Winifrede Bliss were killed in London in a V2 attack on August 2nd 1944, most of the records of the Fellowship being destroyed at that time. Relations with the Bishop of Rochester reached a resolution in 1944 when he had called into the house bringing his licence for the administration of the sacrament and for reservation, but on

condition that there was no variation from the rite of 1662 except those allowed in the draft Prayer Book of 1928.[20]

The government requisitioned Queens Gate throughout the hostilities, the premises suffering war damage, and an anonymous donor paid off the mortgage in October 1945, so reducing the Society's outgoings. The property was eventually sold in 1952 for a sum of £13,944 which provided capital for the new building work which was going on then.[21]

Despite the hostilities, retreatants came to Stacklands, although later in the war the fear of flying bombs was to keep some of them away for a time. In 1942, 43 retreats were taken by members of the Society, 28 of them by Fr Mather, of which two were for religious and took place at the priory, 11 by Wyatt and four by Thompson. Average attendances were 2.5 for the priest retreats, 1.3 for those arranged for laymen, 5.9 for women and 12 for religious. In comparison, during the first year after the Second War, members conducted 45 retreats, 26 of them being led by Mather, 17 by Fr H. H. Bloomfield, one by Thompson and another by Fr Hillier. Average attendances remained at about the same level. With the ending of the war, members were once more invited to lead retreats in other houses, retreats for women being held at Hessle, a house with which the Society had long links, St Ursula's, which belonged to APR, the Priory and at London Colney, and one for men at West Malling.[22]

From the foundation of the Society, keeping up the strength of the Society had been a pressing concern, and bringing together a team of conductors was a goal which remained elusive. During the Stacklands period up to 1955, there were only two years when three priests were in residence, for another ten years there were two, and for three years only one, namely the Superior. Major Bowker, who was without satisfactory accommodation owing to the advancing years of the couple with whom he now had lived, had taken up residence in the House, earning his keep by acting as Estate Agent. At around this time, when the Superior was the only resident priest for a year or more, some of the priest associates assisted him in the leadership of retreats, including Frs Hillier, Thompson, Anderson, Maryon-Wilson and Cheetham.[23] This proved to be a pointer to the way in which the Society would operate in future years.

In January 1948, Fr Charles Stothert came into residence. He seems to have had wide contacts through his previous work in the diocese of Bath and Wells, and during 1949 he led retreats in 11 other houses, this extended ministry continuing into the following years. He also served on the APR Council.[24] Not since before the war had the Society's influence been so widely spread. Because of illness, Mather was out of action for much of 1948 and 1949, and the Society was being kept going by Fr Stothert and Miss Dalziel. The report of the AGM of 1952 describes Stothert as having 'carried on through [that] year in his own willing and happy way'.[25] He left in September 1953, moving to the Convent of the Holy Rood at Felkirk which had long been a centre of retreat work. He continued to lead retreats all over the country and also some training courses on behalf of APR until his death in 1962. A memorial for him was erected at Glastonbury where he had led many retreats (*Vision,* Jan 1962, p. 8; July 1962, p. 18).[26]

[20] Box 3, CM2, 02/02/42, 08/01/43, 01/08/44, 21/10/44.
[21] Box5, AGM 1946, 1952.
[22] CB, RR.
[23] CB, RR.
[24] *Vision,* July 1950.
[25] Box5, AGM 1949, 1950, 1952.
[26] *Vision,* Jan. 1982, July 1982.

Major Bowker died on June 12th 1950, having been a 'great invalid' during his last few years.[27] At the Annual General Meeting of the Fellowship in 1951, Fr Mather paid tribute to him as the original founder, 'whose life and work and generosity had been the great inspiration of the Society'.[28] It was certainly due to his vision and tenacity that it existed at all.

Bowker had not lived to see work commenced on a new wing in early December 1951 after some years of planning. It included a chapel, which housed an antique statue of the Mother of God given by the then treasurer, the Revd Napier Stuart, and relics of St Vincent, St Victorinus and St Margaret Mary. The bedrooms and chapel were blessed on April 10th 1953. Although the design was far from the grandeur of the original vision, the idea of large individual rooms for retreatants was retained, making real solitude possible.

Despite failing health, Fr Mather was still actively involved in conducting retreats, leading some 23 during 1953, although many of these were effectively on a one-to-one basis because of low numbers. He also conducted three group retreats at the Priory. Being once more in the position of having no other priest in residence for almost twelve months, he relied increasingly upon the support of Priest Associates, and nine of them were involved in retreat leadership that year. Miss Dalziel had become a member of the Council at the request of Fr Mather, and his brother Basil, a priest in China for many years, who had been living in the house from at least 1949 onwards, was now made a priest associate and authorised to sign cheques.

The opening of the new facilities in 1953 led to a slight increase in the number of retreats and of retreatants, but the Retreat Register does not record any great surge in attendances. Never-the-less it was decided to proceed with a second wing, enlarging the dining room in the domestic block and providing a new boiler house and automatic heating system. There would be room for nine men retreatants, the chapel block being reserved for women, and also for one priest, leaving an additional spare room. It also included a library and sitting room. After some delays, work began on March 21st 1955, but less than four months later, Mather died on June 1st.

Muriel Cooper wrote of him,

> He had the 'gift of silence,' a patient power of listening to the endless problems and difficulties, troubles and sorrows, that were brought to him for solution, comfort and advice. In characteristically few words he gave his council, with an understanding born of a rare sympathy with the spiritual needs of human hearts and minds.[29]

It is here, in the role of a spiritual director, that his particular charism lay. Certainly, Fr Mather, in sharing his own deep understanding of the Exercises with fellow retreat conductors at an APR conference in 1949, stressed that the key thing in the Ignatian method was the relationship between the conductor and the retreatant. He retained his great love for the method, saying to the same gathering that the sequence of meditations aimed at salvation through the supernatural, and 'it was because the method of the Exercises succeeds in setting its excellent results on a firm basis that has deserved the Church's favour and its special blessing'.[30]

On Fr Mather's death, the Society came into the care of Fr Napier Pitfield Sturt (1902-1982), who had been ordained priest in 1929. His entire active ministry was spent in the Diocese of London including 24 years as Vicar of Holy Cross, St. Pancras, and 18 years as Chaplain of St.

[27] Box 5, AGM 1951.
[28] Box 3, FSRC 1951.
[29] Box 3, FSRC 1955.
[30] in Carpenter-Garnier, M (1948), *Retreats and how to conduct them.* London, Pax House.

Saviour's Priory in Haggerston in what may be termed the 'Father Mather SRC Tradition'. He had taken part in the ascetic theology course at Queen's Gate in the 1930's and was associated with the Society for 50 years. In November 1951 he was appointed Treasurer by Fr Mather, which meant that he also became a member of SRC Chapter. So in the autumn of 1956, Sturt was elected non-residential Chairman, a position which he held until October 1967, although he retained his place on the Council until 1977. [31]

Miss Daziel took over the domestic arrangements. Born in 1887, she had lived the first half of her life in her parent's home in the West End. With her friend Bertha Clark she had thrown herself into the work of SRC from the beginning, having been present when the Society came into being, and other interests faded out as she acted as Mather's secretary. Her house at Stacklands was within easy walking distance of the House, and now she acted as retreat secretary, welcomed the guests when they arrived, was for a time the warden, organiser and general factotum, and when necessary cook, housemaid and table-maid. In the coming ten years and more, her pluck and perseverance was to keep Stacklands in existence until her strength failed. She resigned as secretary of the Council and Warden in 1967, and died in March 1971 at the age of 84.[32] Coupled with her mention must be made of Molly and Jeff Mills. Jeff did much work in the garden whilst Molly's association with the house went back to the Tufnell Park days, and she took on doing the cooking, continuing until the 1990's when she was well past retirement.

There was no member of the Society resident on the premises, and so Associate members were called upon to lead Ignatian retreats when necessary. The house paid its way by allowing non-SRC retreats to use it,

[31] Box3, CM3, 31/03/57, Box5, AGM 25/10/67; Obituary of Fr Sturt, CB, SB1/82.
[32] CB, PC.

and in fact its use continued to increase partly because this was a time when nationally the numbers going on retreat peaked. However it was felt that having non-Ignatian retreats was not in accordance with the Society's original aims and this caused some soul searching. Indeed, the Chairman expressed disquiet at the whole idea of contemplative prayer which is, some would say, contrary to Ignatius' teaching, but this did not agree with the teaching of Archbishop Michael Ramsey at that time.

In 1967, Canon Donald Nicholson, who was then Rector of St Mary's, Bourne Street and another product of the 1930's ascetic theology course, took over as Chairman, with Fr Chamberlain as vice chairman and Mr Johnson, a retired gentleman who lived at 1 Stacklands Cottages, as treasurer. The house was kept going by a succession of resident housekeepers assisted by volunteers. It was reported to the AGM that in 1968 the number attending the house for 30 retreats were 51 priests (42 more than in 1958), 42 men and 236 ladies, making a total of 329. However, the Society's own retreats were poorly attended, at the most filling half the available accommodation.[33] Therefore by October of the following year, it was being suggested that the house be closed owing to the problems in keeping the place going and maintaining the necessary staff. The money would be used to purchase a smaller house for just a few retreatants, and the present house be sold to a suitable Church society.

But by the next October the position had changed. There were no takers for the property, but Donald Nicholson had offered to resign his living and to move into residence on condition that his parents could move in as well. He had a group of young clergy from the London area who had begun training as Ignatian conductors, which was one of the

[33] Box3, CM4, 29/10/69.

original hopes of the founders of the Society. The offer was accepted with alacrity and Nicholson took up residence at Stacklands for a stipend of £350 per annum, with his parents paying a nominal sum. In the end, mother and father survived for only a year but Nicholson was to be in residence for the next ten years.[34] Canon Nicholson was the ideal man for the job. He was an inveterate talker who could hold any audience entranced but could be quiet when he needed to be. He knew a great number of people especially in Anglo-Catholic circles, and was sure of what he believed but was ready to listen to others. He had been for a number of years responsible for training clergy in the Scottish Episcopal Church, and so was ready to attract and influence younger clergy.

A residential conference was held for the young conductors the following April (1971) at which the society's future was planned. The fourteen of them committed themselves to take part in a two-year training course with a mixture of day activities and short residential sessions. They were later joined by a second group of clergy. Nicholson was joined in residence at Stacklands by a lay man, Michael Robson, in September 1972, who was to stay with the Society for nearly 25 years. His duties were Company Secretary, including taking the minutes of all meetings, doing the booking for the house and keeping everything running there, acting as server in chapel and serving meals. He eventually moulded it to suit his personality, and in the end it was very much his society.[35] When Nicholson moved to Scotland, he was the only one, with the housekeeper of the time, to live in the house.

For the next ten years or so, the house went along very smoothly and the Society flourished. In 1973 the Society had 28 Associate members and the house hosted thirty retreats a year, ten of them society events and

[34] Box3, CM4, 26/10/70.
[35] Box3, CM4, 17/07/72.

another ten with members as leaders. Total attendance was 367, of whom 50 were priests, 80 men and the rest were ladies. The Society was fulfilling its aim of teaching new men to take mainly Ignatian retreats, although the original intention to have a resident community was not being met.[36]

At about this time, after Vatican II, the Jesuits in the Roman Church were changing the way in which they conducted Ignatian retreats. By going back to the original teaching of St Ignatius, they realised that they were being offered in much too rigid a manner, that retreats should be offered on a one-to-one basis and that the real leader was the Holy Spirit. This led Donald Nicholson to make an Individually Guided Retreat in 1978 at Loyola Hall for a month.[37] This encouraged some other members of the Society to follow his example, and Fr John Arrowsmith attended an 8 day IGR at St Beuno's in North Wales in 1980. The Jesuit priest Fr Gerard Hughes was the warden there and was opening the retreat house to Christians of all denominations. The programme was cut down to a minimum; the daily pattern of retreat was four periods of private prayer for between 30 minutes and one hour, 20 -30 minutes interview daily and a mass at midday. That was all. The emphasis was on repetition; there were only two Bible passages each day with some background reading, and the prayer exercises were chosen for each individual. The dress was informal, something which particularly struck SRC members, and there was time at St Beuno's beforehand for compiling a faith history.[38] Arrowsmith was followed by other members of the Society who found it helpful and shared their experience with others. But the Society was now split between th se who had had this wider training and those who only

[36] Box3, CM4/20/11/1973.
[37] CB, PC.
[38] CB, PC.

had experience of SRC and preached retreats, and this was to have an effect upon the future.

The house was soon again in financial trouble using its investment income rather than re-investing, a pattern to be repeated for next 25 years.[39] In 1979 it was seriously proposed once more that the house be closed and a small house be purchased in the country, but nothing was done.[40] Despite this, in that year the total attendance for retreats went up above 400 for the first time.[41]

In 1980 Fr Nicholson gave up his task as Chaplain and his residency at the house to take on a similar role at the Convent of St Mary at Inverness, but retained the office of Chairman and Superior.[42] This left only Michael Robson in residence in the house. He had been a member of the Society from 1973 to 1978, when he resigned for personal reasons but it did not alter his employment by the Society.[43] He was regarded as a non-voting member of the Council. Nicholson soon found it to be too much of a burden to be Chairman from Scotland, and in 1982 he resigned as Chairman but once more was elected to the honorary post of Superior. His successor was Mr K G Harland who had been associated with the Society for many years, and three years later by the Fr John Arrowsmith

At about this time, a difference arose between those who wanted to keep the Society as it was, reflecting the comfortable Anglo-Catholic ethos, and those who wanted a more progressive image according to the latest methods of working suggested by the Jesuits. The dissent was centred at first on the London cell, which consisted mainly of those members who lived in the London area. It focused on such matters as the

[39] Box3, CM4/13/16/75.
[40] Box5, AGM 09/07/79.
[41] Box3, CM4, 24/03/80.
[42] Box3, CM4, 10/11/80.
[43] Box3, CM4, 02/06/78.

appearance of Chapel and the atmosphere of the House, but the cell dispersed and roughly the division came to lie between those who had experienced an IGR and those who had undertaken only the Preached Retreat. The trouble was to rumble on for many years. Further, it was compounded when the Society had to decide whether or not it should admit women priests to membership.

Fr Arrowsmith was elected Superior in 1991, but died before he could take up office. This was a great blow to the Society because he was a well liked and popular leader who would move it on to new things. His death did reveal him though as a member of the Society of the Holy Cross where he was respected just as much; the suspicion is that quite a few members of the one Society are also members of the other but this is never referred to in the minutes.

Fr Michael Woodgate took over, although his appointment did not last for long as he was one of those who went over to Rome as part of the exit caused by the ordination of women. Before he left, Michael helped the membership work through the question of who was eligible for membership. As one of the results of Vatican II, and of the freedom which came about as a result of it, was that any person with the right experience was able to take Ignatian retreats, be they Methodist or Anglican, lay person or ordained, male or female, even in the Church of Rome. Membership of the Society was therefore surely dependent, not on the ability to celebrate Holy Communion, but in that ability to give the Exercises, and the logic was that the Society should be open to any person with the requisite training. As soon as the approval of the Charity Commissioners to the change was obtained, in 1988 Roman Catholic sisters, with whom the Society had worked for some time, joined and were an important addition to the membership, along with Fr Woodgate himself. For a time, membership rose to nearly 40.

Despite all the controversy, use of Stacklands continued to increase. In 1984–85, the residential total was 494, and the number of day visitors was 419, making a total of 913 guests.[44] In the year 1986 -7 this had increased to 511 and 607, the first year that the number of day guests was more than residential, and by 1995 the figure are 482 residential and 1,117 day guests.[45] This was a fairly typical pattern for the period; those retreat houses that kept going were seeing their residential business being supplemented by day use because this was cheaper for the user. However, the majority of retreats were not Ignatian in character, which was not in accordance with the Society's objective. The total number of laity coming on purely SRC retreats went down from 89 in the year 1990 to 53 in the year 1995, whilst the number of clergy went down from 40 to 15 in the same period. Moreover, Stacklands was unique in having so many guests coming without a conductor and without food being supplied (295 on 1995/6), because they found the retreat house charges were too expensive, although they still appreciated the atmosphere of the place.[46] However, the place was loosing money.

This level of business demanded a dedicated staff, and while Michael Robson was in charge he succeeded in keeping the staff available, usually one fellow resident housekeeper assisted by various people from the village. However, they did not stay for long and there was a succession of housekeepers. When he went, which he did in 1998 when he retired, they went too.

Revd David Rogers was appointed on Sept 1st 1998.[47] He had spent most of his working life in retreat work, and worked at Stacklands without a House Keeper, doing the cooking himself. He did increase the house usage, but not enough to be meeting costs. His successor in 2003 was the Rev Jim Batman and his wife Elizabeth. This pair were different in that for the first time they were committed Evangelicals, trained in Ignatian spirituality, and they brought a change of ethos to the house; but neither was they particularly successful in financially turning the house around.

By 2005, the Council were advised that the funds of the Society had run out. Various options were considered, but in the end all were rejected as being unpractical. They were advised that the only course of action was for the house to close. It took them two years to sell the house, but when they did they raised £2 million, which has been invested.[48]

The Council still promote Ignatian spirituality by making money available in the following ways. First, they make grants to its members to keep up with their reading and to attend Ignatian retreats. Secondly, they give grants to anyone engaged in Ignatian study. Third, the Society own two cottages which have stood on the estate ever since before was bought back in the 1920. These have been repaired, and one of them will be let out for short periods for private retreats. Lastly, and above all, they are a body of men and women who take Ignatian spirituality very seriously and seek to promote it in every way possible. In these ways, the aims of the Society are being preserved.

It seems a long time ago since Major Bowker and Edward Mather set up the Society of Retreat Conductors and their original vision of a residential community able to lead retreats has never been completely realised. However, worthwhile work continues to be done in accordance with their intentions and looks set to continue for years to come.

[44] CB SB2/Chairman's Report 1986.
[45] CB SB2/Annual Report for 1987 and SB3/Annual Report for 1996.
[46] CB SB4/Green Sheet.
[47] CM4, 24/04/98.
[48] Various Development Group reports.